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ABSTRACT

This document presents a brief, personal look at school governance in the canton of Zurich, Switzerland. The author, a former teacher in Zurich, describes the close relationship between the community and an educational system in which teachers are appointed temporarily by a lay school board and must be confirmed in their positions by periodic public election. (PGD)

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OBSERVATIONS ON THE GOVERNANCE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN SWITZERLAND

Heinz Karl Meier

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Preface

Dr. Heinz Karl Meier is Lucis I. Jaffe Professor of History, and Dean of the School of Arts and Letters at Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia. A native of Switzerland, Dr. Meier was graduated from the Evangelishes Lehrerseminar, Zurich, and received his M.A. from the University of Zurich. His Ph.D. degree was earned at Emory University, where he also taught both French and German. Dr. Meier has been at Old Dominion University since 1960. He has held a Swiss National Foundation grant, been a Visiting Professor at the University of the West Indies, and has twice been President of the Swiss American Historical Society, whose journal he edits. As a specialist on modern Swiss history and European intellectual affairs, Dr. Meier's publications include four books on Swiss and Swiss American Studies.

"Observations on the Governance of Public Schools in Switzerland" was Dr. Meier's presentation at The Dedication of the Isaac N. Thut Memorial Collection of Books on The Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education and International Education at The School of Education, The University of Connecticut, Storrs, Ct. on October 14, 1977. Additional copies of this monograph are available from: The World Education Project, U-32, The University of Connecticut, Storrs, Ct. 06268.

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A brochure entitled THE DEDICATION OF THE ISAAC N. THUT MEMORIAL COLLECTION OF BOOKS ON THE SOCIAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF EDUCATION AND INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION, containing a six page biography of Dr. Thut, and lists of the contributors to and materials in the collection was issued in October, 1977. 18 pp. ISBN 0-918158-15

"Observations on the Governance of Public Schools in Switzerland"

In 1964 I.N. Thut published a book with Don Adams with the title Educational Patterns in Contemporary Society. It contained a small section on "Education in Switzerland." The text reveals a good acquaintance with the major factors and peculiarities of education in Switzerland. The authors duly stress the fact that there is no such thing as a Swiss educational system, but that due to the federalist nature of the Swiss state there are twenty-five cantonal systems instead, each more or less different from the other. Thus one always has to be careful to stay away from generalizations. Thut and Adams alert the reader that there are exceptions to every general statement they make. Rather than speaking about Switzerland, it is much safer to speak about education in Zurich or Geneva or Basel Stadt or Appenzell Innerrhoden. Nevertheless they end the section with the statement that "it is possible that Swiss education will be one of the most useful subjects for comparative studies in the next quarter century."

One suspects that it was I.N. Thut with his special interest in Switzerland who wrote the part on Swiss education and came to this conclusion. He felt enabled to make such a positive assertion because he noticed changes occurring everywhere in the direction of "the extension of educational opportunities for all classes of students in every geographic region" and found that "experimental procedures and arrangements of many descriptions" were being tried.

In my brief presentation this evening I do not want to pick up either of these themes. Rather than analyzing innovative trends in the Swiss educational system, I shall concentrate on a constant

in Swiss education that has been one of its key elements since the time public education has taken roots in the country and its cantons.

I am referring to the system of public school governance as it exists in many parts of Switzerland. My examples will all be taken from Canton Zurich, however, since this is the system I am most familiar with. I was and presumably still am a certified Zurich primary school teacher, grades 1 to 6, and a certified secondary school teacher, grades 7 to 9. I have taught classes at all these levels.

Early in my school teaching career, long before I ever had an inkling that I would visit the United States, let alone immigrate here and become a citizen of this great country, I was a school teacher in a remote part of Canton Zurich on top of a mountain ridge. The school house and a country inn were the only houses on that spot. The homes with families and children were spread over the hills and hidden in the valleys. The schoolhouse consisted of one small sized classroom on the first floor and a two-room teacher's apartment on the second. In that little schoolhouse with its little classroom I taught eight children, two in the first and two in the third and one each in second, fourth, sixth and eighth grade.

A few years later, after having taken additional courses at the University of Zurich and passed the required exams, I was employed as a secondary school teacher in one of the richest and most elegant communities on Lake Zurich. I and one colleague taught two parallel seventh grade classes of about twenty-eight

children each. He taught math and sciences and I taught all other subjects: German language and literature, French, history, geography, calligraphy, art and physical education.

The difference between the two situations could hardly have been greater and more pronounced, yet there were some basic ingredients present that established a commonality that bridged these differences. Both schools were part of the system of the Canton of Zurich, the most populous of the 25 cantons (or states) of Zwitzerland. As such they were regulated by the school laws of the canton which among other things presctibes and provides the teaching materials, including text books that have to be used in the classroom.

The canton, through representative teams of teachers, also establishes the teaching goals that have to be reached during the year. As a check on the work done by the teacher and their students, it issues annual examinations papers in all major subject matters that have to be used as a basis for the teaching at the annual examination day, the last day of the school year. This day is open-house day, and parents and the public at large are invited and welcome to visit the class on that day.

These are a most exciting few hours for the school children, especially younger ones, who think that they are being tested in front of their fathers and mothers. They are, in a way, but the person who is really on the spot is the teacher. He is naked to the eyes of an interested, knowledgeable, inquisitive and critical public. If he has not made good use of his time during the year there is little he can do now to cover up for his sins of omission,

or laziness, or incompetence. (By the way, I am speaking of the teacher as "he" not only because I am talking about myself but because until very recently the vast majority of public school teachers in Zurich were male, even at the lower levels.)

What a joy, however, when that morning goes well, when the children, scrubbed and dressed in their Sunday clothes, participate with liveliness and eagerly work out the problems presented to them from the examination sheets, proving to everybody present that they are bright kids and again, more important to the teacher, that the teacher has done his job well.

Among the people present on those occasions there are always members and representatives of the district school commission and the local school board. The district school commissions supervise the schools in the district of the canton to which the community belongs and see to it that the cantonal laws and regulations are carried out. These commissions consist of lay people and occasionally teachers, elected to their office by the people of the district.

Each of the commissioners is assigned a number of school classes and teachers that he has to visit several times during the year. Thus, any morning during the year one can expect the unannounced appearance of a gentleman from the district school commission. He will stay around and listen to what's going on for two or three hours at a time. He will ask to be shown the note books of the children.

Even though, or perhaps because, he is a layman he is able to note how well the teacher is prepared, what the atmosphere and

morale in the classroom are, whether the teacher is able to maintain order and discipline, whether he is careful in grading written work, whether he succeeds in teaching the children orderliness, whether he is methodically sound, and so on. At the end of the school year the commissioners put their observations in writing in a statement that becomes part of the district records and is given to the teacher for his enlightenment and encouragement or to exhort him to mend his ways, as the case may be.

The real control of the school, however, is at the local level, that of the school community, which in most instances coincides with the political community. The board of the school community is sometimes elected by the people, sometimes appointed by the council of the political community. Its meetings are attended by the teachers who have a voice, even though in most cases not a vote, in the deliberations of the board.

The community school board handles all local school matters. It prepares requests for new school houses and renovations of old ones. These requests are passed on to the council of the political community for eventual submission to the voters of the community.

Among the most important duties of the school board is the selection and evaluation of the teachers employed by the community. It chooses and selects from the pool of qualified persons available in the canton. The teachers, however, are only appointed by the board; they get their permanent employment from the voters of their community. Yes, teachers in Canton Zurich are elected and then they have to stand for periodic confirmation in their jobs by popular vote.

Although I was certified to be eligible for a permanent position, I never underwent the process of baptism by election. Before we settled permanently in one of the communities of Canton Zurich my wife and I wanted to go to the United States for a year. Instead of living on Lake Zurich we got stuck in Atlanta, Georgia, and are now at home on the shores of Chesapeake Bay.

But back to the Swiss school organizational setup. The schools themselves run on their own. It is clear that my one-room, one-teacher school in the hills of eastern Zurich needed no principal. But the other schoolhouse near Zurich had about twenty classes and was next to a primary schoolhouse with about twelve more. They did not have any principals, wither, nor any other fulltime administrators. The whole community with four schoolhouses and some sixty teachers and 1500 children did not have a single administrator. The school board members were laymen who performed their duties on an honorary basis on top of their regular jobs. The teachers in the schoolhouses elected one from among themselves as their executive secretary, so to speak, who was ombudsman and arbitrator for problems and conflicts and supervised the scheduling of facilities which were used by everybody, such as the gymnasium, the labs, the choir hall and art studios.

Enough of these descriptions. What is the meaning of all this?

It is a characteristic of the public schools in Switzerland that they are closely tied to the body politic. Schools and their teachers are not distant entities to themselves, nor are they the preserves or playballs of professional interest groups; they are the jealously guarded property of the people who use them. Maybe

there are persons in the audience tonight who doubt the wisdom of such a setup, but I personally believe that it is the best possible way of making the school amenable to the needs of the people by and for whom they were created.

The ramifications of this are manifold. Here are some of them:

1) The public schools are treasured by the people of Switzerland. To be sure, there are numerous private schools. They are designed for special clienteles, for wealthy foreigners, for example, who want to put their children in well kept finishing schools, or for people who want to experiment with special philosophies of education such as the anthroposophies of the Rudolf Steiner schools. The vast majority of Swiss, however, rich and poor, peasants and city dwellers, workers, employees and employers send their children to the public schools.

2) As a consequence, the public schools receive all the necessary support needed to make them as good as they can be. The people are proud of their schools and eager to provide them their support. Once in a while funds for a new school house, let us say, are not granted by the people at the polls. This has happened in recent years more often than before. The reasons are not hard to find. During the unprecedented boom of the 1960s architects and school boards have become intoxicated with grandiose designs for ever more expensive and fancy school palaces. The people who receive the plans for the proposed schools with detailed descriptions and cost analyses as part of their voting package judge them soberly and factually. A no vote is not a no to the school; rather it is a message to the planners to go back to the drawing board and to

come up with a less costly version. "The community already has two schoolhouses with large gymnasiums and indoor swimming pools. In view of a threatening recession (in Switzerland an unemployment rate of 0.2 percent is a threatening sign of impending recession) we can do without these frills. Phys ed classes for the new school can be scheduled in the existing facilities." This is a possible way of decoding a no vote.

Support for the schools is also demonstrated in the interest with which the people in general follow the developments on educational issues, both theoretical and practical.

3) This leads to a third point. The people on the whole are a well informed, knowledgeable public. The demands made by the system on the time and energy of the public and especially its representatives on the various boards and commissions are enormous. Concerns are at times raised as to whether the electorate is able to master the complexities of modern educational issues and to make intelligent decisions. This problem is perhaps at its most critical in the larger cities on the issue of electing and confirming teachers by popular ballot. How can the ordinary citizen know who among the dozen of teachers does not deserve to receive his vote? As a matter of fact, in the vast majority of cases the popular vote is in effect a rubber stamp process, in which the list put together by the school board is officially endorsed. Still, on occasion an individual teacher is singled out and subject to closer scrutiny through the press or the political parties. And once in a long while an individual is not elected or not confirmed, in effect recalled.

One such case was prominently displayed in the Zurich press earlier this year. It concerned a woman secondary school teacher in one of the Lake Zurich communities. She attracted the attention of parents when she read with her class of thirteen-year-old children a booklet of a living avantgarde Swiss writer. The young hero in the story made derogatory remarks about the extra-marital sexual activities of his father and used a string of the German equivalents of American four-letter words to express his own feelings.

This was objectionable enough to mobilize the local school board. The teacher was asked to explain why she had chosen this particular story which was not part of the regular, approved body of teaching materials. Her explanations were satisfactory and the board endorsed her for the upcoming election. Unfortunately for her, some of her opponents, not to say enemies, found out that she had hidden the fact that she and her husband were members of a frowned-upon extreme left wing party. This, together with the previous notoriety, was enough to lead a majority of those who went to the polls in Erlenbach to deny her the privilege of becoming a teacher in their community. I personally do not like some of the implications of this case, yet I cannot quarrel with the principle that the people should have the final word on who should be the teachers of their children.

4) This leads me to a fourth observation. Swiss public schools are responsive to the needs of the public and adaptable to the changing demands of our age. They are less well suited to serve as forums for the ideas of educational innovators; even though

Switzerland has its share of those. New ideas and concepts are developed not so much at encounters in professional meetings as tested in the ordinary school environment open to the scrutiny of the public. Values of a basic, comprehensive, traditional rather than progressive nature prevail.

5) Finally, I permit myself to stress the obvious fact that Swiss schools are run with a minimum of administrative red tape. The huge amounts of taxpayers' money eaten up by any school system are used in Switzerland for the primary purpose of teaching the children and not to run the schools through an elaborate apparatus of principals, assistant principals, counsellors of all kinds, and secretaries and record keepers.

I have touched tonight on only one aspect of education in Switzerland, that of the governance of the Swiss schools. I have said nothing about curriculum and teaching methods, teacher education and in-service training, the vocational and gymnasium type schools, nor the prevailing philosophies underlying education in Switzerland. I hope that the topic chosen by me and its treatment would have found approval with Professor Thut.

Shortly before his Educational Patterns in Contemporary Society (1964) appeared, a book by Admiral H.G. Rickover was published with the provocative title The Swiss Schools and Ours. Why Theirs are Better (1962). It found a considerable echo at the time, much of it critical and slightly derisive. "The Admiral Speaks Again" and "Heidi and Johnny" were among the reviewer's titles. We are not really out to prove that one system is better than another. We try, however, to learn from the way things are

done in other places. This, after all, is the purpose of comparative studies of the kind Professor Thut has carried out in his life work. And, I assume, this is at least one of the goals of the World Education Project and the Connecticut Chapter of the World Education Fellowship that are such gracious hosts tonight. Perhaps the example of Switzerland can inspire us to renew our efforts to make our public schools the kind of useful, responsive and valuable tools we all would like them to be.